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SUBJECT: ABKHAZ "FM" SHAMBA IN ANKARA: "INDEPENDENCE NOT
NEGOTIABLE"

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4, b, d

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Addressing a small audience of supporters and Caucasus experts in Ankara June 4, Abkhaz "FM" Shamba underscored the priority Abkhazia attaches to its "special relationship" with the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey and the importance of opening direct travel with Turkey, but described Turkish policy in the region as unbalanced. Abkhazia had no choice but to seek good relations with Russia and Shamba credited former Russian President Putin for preventing armed conflict through Moscow's recent measures. Shamba stated it was impossible for Abkhazians to live with Georgians and that Abkhazia would not resume talks with Georgia until Georgia withdraws from the Upper Kodori Gorge. Speaking in both Abkhaz and Russian, he described Abkhazia's incorporation within Georgia as a Stalinist-era policy the West should dismantle, discussed the discrimination and persecution the Abkhaz people have endured since that time, and stated that Abkhazia would never give up its hard-fought independence. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The Turkey-based Caucasus-Abkhazia Solidarity Committee (www.abhazya.org) hosted Abkhaz "FM" Shamba June 4 in Ankara for an "Abkhazia day" that was to include his speech and an evening cultural program. Shamba, accompanied by three delegates from Abkhazia, along with two deputies from the Abkhaz "parliament," mixed easily with the small crowd. The event had not been widely publicized, and there was no GOT senior-level participation (or other foreign diplomatic representation), apart from a mid-level official from both the Ministry of Justice and the Turkish International Development Agency (TIKA). (A Turkish parliament vice chairman and a ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) steering group member reportedly attended the evening reception.)

¶3. (SBU) Shamba's delegation was Turkish-speaking, including Abkhaz "parliament" Compatriot Connections Committee Chairman Sener Gogua, who translated Shamba's remarks (delivered first in Abkhaz and then in Russian) into Turkish. Gogua used to reside in Turkey and told us he now works actively on building relations with the Abkhaz diaspora here -- primarily based in Istanbul and Adapazari (Marmaris region). Most over-age-forty diaspora are unlikely to return to Abkhazia he said, but the younger generation of Turkish Abkhaz is eager to return. In this regard, facilitating direct travel connections between Turkey and Abkhazia is critical, he told us.

¶4. (SBU) Noting that Shamba, in his opening remarks, had not completely closed the door on further talks with Georgia, one questioner asked what the basis for further negotiations would be if the Abkhaz see no alternative to independence. Shamba ducked the question and launched instead into a

lengthy history of Abkhaz identity, the repeated failures by Georgia to respect Abkhaz autonomy since the Soviet era, war with Georgia, and the subsequent violation of the Moscow agreement which have all led the Abkhaz people to realize a federal structure is impossible. Shamba stated that Abkhazia does not "in principle" welcome Georgian President Saakashvili's recent autonomy proposal, arguing the Abkhaz people made their decision for independence through the defense of their territory, a 1999 referendum, and a constitution. He noted the Ajaria (Batumi) region's autonomy within Georgia, implying that it is being lost by Ajarian parliamentary decisions to cede greater responsibility for local affairs to Tbilisi.

15. (SBU) While the small, 25-person audience appeared sympathetic to Shamba, a few questions revealed a degree of Turkish apprehension about Russia's expanding presence in Abkhazia. Shamba stated that he could "openly and officially say" Russia prevented war by announcing it would increase the number of peacekeepers in Abkhazia, likening it to Taiwan's U.S. security guarantee and arguing that Putin's intervention did lead to rhetorical change in Tbilisi. He said Abkhazia's experience informs Sukhumi that "all balances" in the region must be taken into consideration. He underscored that Abkhazia had won and solidified independence through its own efforts, but "every small country needs the support of bigger countries, especially in the Caucasus." "If the United States leaves Georgia alone, Georgia too may develop a different relationship with Russia." Russia, he went on, gained a "trump card" following recognition of Kosovo's independence and can now openly state its interests in the region. "No matter what people say, Kosovo's recognition

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changed many things," he said. "For the first time, the international community recognized an autonomous region as independent." He said Abkhazia was better positioned than Kosovo for independence, arguing that the Soviet constitution contained provisions for the recognition of autonomous regions' independence while the Yugoslav constitution did not. Abkhazia's problem, he said, is political, not historical. He also predicted the EU will soon begin to seek better relations with Abkhazia noting that EU foreign policy chief advisor Solana's planned June 5 visit to Abkhazia.

16. (SBU) Asked how Turkey-Georgia relations -- particularly military cooperation -- affect Turkey-Abkhazia relations, Shamba described Turkish policy in the South Caucasus region as "not detailed," and "NATO-related." He said if Turkey had a long-term regional policy it would not support Georgia unilaterally. While other powers, namely Russia and the United States, have increased their activities in the region, Turkey, unfortunately, has not. It also does not take advantage of its large Abkhaz diaspora. He described how Abkhaz "authorities" had helped facilitate the return of Abkhaz-origin Turks to Abkhazia and how Abkhazia is granting dual citizenship to these citizens. But these measures have been unilateral and not supported by the GOT.

17. (C) The Georgian Embassy was none too pleased about Shamba's visit, according to Georgian DCM Irakli Koplatadze, but was satisfied with the low level of GOT involvement; MFA participation, he said, would have been unacceptable. The Georgians believe they showed some flexibility by not pressuring the GOT to turn off this visit, even though it was a private affair. (The last-minute cancellation of previously scheduled visits by Abkhaz "president" Bagapsh embittered Abkhaz diaspora and ethnic Circassian community leaders in Turkey and led to some unwelcome criticism of the GOT's pro-Georgia policies.) Koplatadze suggested that Shamba's visit to Ankara, coming only a day before Solana's visit to Georgia and Abkhazia, might be indicative of some movement on the issue.

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